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ABSTRACT

Eighteen black students were asked their perceptions of life on a predominantly white university campus, Syracuse University (New York). Data from interviews were analyzed as well as accounts in the campus newspaper during the 5-year period 1988-1993 and interviews with four administrators who worked with minority students in an academic support capacity. Nine of the students had participated in the 1989 pre-college summer program. Students were interviewed in their sophomore year and again in their senior year. Extensive quotes from the interviews support the analysis which covered initial impressions of the university, reactions to the summer program, the college experience, and their feelings of difference. Three major themes surfaced: (1) student identity/development; (2) social interactions; and (3) academic interactions. It was the students' perception that getting through college and interacting with faculty are more difficult for students of color, than for students of the majority culture. All the students interviewed mentioned racism and having been affected by it either in a classroom, an administrative office, or an incident with students on campus. (Contains 56 references.)

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PERCEPTIONS OF THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE:
African American Students on a Predominantly White Campus

or

A Qualitative Piece of the Retention Puzzle

ED 382 152

by

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ABSTRACT

PUTTING ON THEIR ARMOR EVERYDAY:
African American Students on a Predominantly White Campus

or

A Qualitative Piece of the Retention Puzzle

Students were asked their perceptions of life on a predominantly white campus, their personal experience. Paramount for them was the social environment which supports or hinders their persistence. Data from thirty-one interviews (18 Black students, 4 administrators) were analyzed, as well as, accounts in the campus student newspaper during the five year period 1988-1993. Students' voices are commentary to the ongoing discourse of how to create an environment where all students can succeed. I propose to focus on what Black\African American students experience and *how they interpret their experiences* in what they perceive as a hostile environment.

Syracuse University is a research institution located in central New York State, in northeast United States. Because of the proximity to New York City, the university has an Admissions Office located in Manhattan for the purpose of recruitment and alumni relations. The University boasts successful recruitment efforts among the Black and Hispanic populations located in the five boroughs of New York: Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Long Island and Queens. Three predominantly Black/Hispanic high schools are the primary feeder schools for students from groups underrepresented on Syracuse University's campus. My data indicate the students' feel that being "from the City" has significance for their experience on this campus.

The Black students recruited from New York, the New England states, New Jersey and Pennsylvania come from home environments which could be representative of all socioeconomic levels: lower class. middle class, upper middle class and even wealthy. Many are of mixed heritage being descendants of second generation immigrants from the West Indes, British Isles, Africa, and the southern United States. Obviously, the University does not depend solely on the Northeast for its Black enrollment. With a national sports reputation, exemplary schools and colleges, world renowned faculty and programs, Syracuse University attracts Black students from areas urban, suburban, and rural across the United States and from many other countries.

Syracuse University through the Division of Student Support and Development sponsors several programs for the encouragement, enrichment

and academic support of students from underrepresented ethnic groups. Preeminent among these programs is the Summer Institute a comprehensive pre-college experience. ***The Summer Institute*** is the "umbrella" organization administered by the Center for Academic Achievement Counseling and Student Support Center.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to learn from the perceptions of Black/African American students about their experiences on a predominantly White university campus, including what it means to them to have a pre-college experience and how they find safe spaces in a "hostile environment." From the students' responses to open-ended questions, I look at the negative and positive experiences most often shared through the questions: *why* these experiences occur for Black/African American students, and *how* these experiences may differ from the experiences of White students on a predominantly White campus.

My purpose is to understand the factors that enable these students to persist to graduation during the four year period from the Fall 1989 to the end of the year 1993. Listening to the students' own *voices* describes the campus social climate and academic environment. The social climate is something that occurs, whereas the academic environment is a setting which is supposedly structured by university policy and philosophy. Students' responses enable us to learn what makes a positive, supportive and comfortable climate for them as

opposed to what they found to be negative, painful, and disruptive to their academic success. In the literature on education, there are many terms used to *describe* and *categorize* non-White students of African descent. I need to clarify terms used in this study. Descriptors include: Black

of the African Diaspora

African American

Biracial

people of color

minorities

other minorities.

Black is the term I use when talking about the heterogeneous group of students of the African diaspora whose skin is any of the many shades from light brown to rich black in color. Black also includes, but is not limited to people who are Caribbean born, European born of Black parents and biracial persons with African heritage. In this study, ***of the African diaspora*** is used to indicate Black students whose origins are not specifically known but they are of African descent (American or not) who include themselves in the *Black Community* of students. **African American** indicates those Black students born in any of the fifty states of the United States of America. ***Biracial*** is the term I'll use for those students who express that they are of mixed cultural background and they acknowledge their African heritage. ***People of color*** is a term used here to indicate non-White students of the various ethnic

backgrounds previously considered, by society, within the larger term ***minorities***. The term ***other minorities*** is used when giving attribution to students or scholars from other than Black ethnic or cultural groups.

Additional categories used in the literature to talk about these students include *At-risk, High risk, underprepared, disadvantaged.* None of the above terms are used either by me or my respondents to describe ourselves. These terms will be used only as they appear in original citations. Upon investigation, I found there were multiple meanings given for all these terms, most depending on the particular circumstance being considered. My focus is on the students' *perceptions* of their experiences.

RELATED LITERATURE

Interaction in Higher Education

There is an abundance of studies, books, articles and, reviews of the literature on the topics of student recruitment, retention and interaction in higher education (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991 ; Tinto 1994) . Most researchers and practitioners agree there is a need for further in-depth inquiry into the experiences of the individual ethnic groups: African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, etc. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) suggest that future theory-based research should consider indirect as well as direct effects: "We still strongly suspect that students' individual characteristics frequently mediate the impact of college; not all students benefit equally from the same experience" (p. 634).

Prior to when Tinto (1975) first postulated that a student's persistence was related to the degree to which a student was integrated into the college's social and academic communities, most studies were related to integration as a result of desegregation and the Civil Rights Movement. Parallel to the Tinto model (1975, 1987), however, were African American and other Black scholars, from many disciplines, studying reasons why Black children at all levels of education have difficulty learning, adjusting and staying in predominantly white institutions (Ogbu 1978 ; Blackwell 1981; Willie 1981; Astin 1982; Thomas 1984; Stikes 1984; Allen 1984; Asante and Noor Al-Deen 1984; Nettles, et al. 1985; Richardson and Bender, 1985).

Other theorists (Ajzen and Fishbein 1972, 1977; Bean, 1983; Bentler and Speckart 1979, 1981) contend that there is a strong relationship between attitudes, intentions and behavior and, how students manage a new (college) environment . More recently, Bean (1990) put forth a model which looks at the external factors such as family encouragement, high school peers, community support, and how the strength of the students' background plays a significant role in affecting both attitudes and behavior. Scholars also have begun to look at the consequence of *special treatment* of Black athletes in higher education (Adler and Adler 1991). In the 1990s, several African American and other scholars of color, have written articles and edited anthologies presenting the multiple, and historical perspectives on issues effecting Blacks' interaction in higher education (Allen et al. 1991; Altbach and Lomotey 1991; Gibson and

Ogbu 1991; Lang and Ford 1992; Willie, Garibaldi and Reed 1991).

Mow and Nettles (1990) recount Pascarella's 1985 test of the Tinto (1975) model. In Pascarella's nine-year study of attrition among black and white students, he found similarities regarding the effects of background characteristics and their relationship to persistence in higher education. This study also showed significant, positive association of academic and social integration to persistence among both groups of students. Mow and Nettles (1990) make the point that "social integration was equally important to - perhaps even more important than - academic integration as an influence on ultimate degree completion for black students" (p. 84).

Fit and Identity

Referring to the theory of "institutional fit", discussed both by Astin, 1975) and Cope and Hannah, 1975, Astin, 1982) found that minorities with the best chance of persistence had seven characteristics: (1) high entrance GPA and test scores; (2) well-developed study habits; (3) a high academic ability self esteem; (4) a relatively affluent and well-educated family background; (5) an integrated high school experience; (6) on campus living arrangements; and (7) no outside job. These findings were based on Astin's Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey data from students' first two years of undergraduate work. Data gathered from my students, who entered college in 1989 and graduated in 1993, helps us to develop a better understanding of how these characteristics play out in the four years to graduation.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) state that many student characteristics have been overlooked within the current framework of attrition model research. Weidman (1989) found that sociologically based persistence research places emphasis on the general socialization process in college rather than on the attributes of the individual undergoing socialization. He advocates for research that deals with the affective dimensions of undergraduate socialization; paying special attention to "special student populations" e.g. women, minorities, and returning adults (Weidman, 1989).

There is also the area of psycho social development of traditional college-aged students which suggest that there are natural developmental processes students go through (Chickering 1969; Cross 1978; Perry 1981). For the population of this study is necessary to look at the literature on "Black Identity" and "coping skills" of minorities in a majority culture (Spencer, 1985; Fordam and Ogbu, 1986; Helms, 1986; Helms and Parham, 1992; Cross 1991). Yonai, (1991), along with Pascarella and Terenzini, (1991 and Nettles, 1991), recommends further study of persistence of the various ethnic groups; giving more attention to the different groups of students and, post-freshman students; to extend the data collection over the length of retention and/or persistence to graduation. It is important that the students' perspectives be investigated.

An Overview

The Black students recruited from New York, the New England states, New Jersey and Pennsylvania come from home environments which could be

representative of all socioeconomic levels: lower class. middle class, upper middle class and even wealthy. Many are of mixed heritage being descendants of second generation immigrants from the West Indes, British Isles, Africa, and the southern United States. Obviously, the University does not depend solely on the Northeast for its Black enrollment. With a national sports reputation, exemplary schools and colleges, world renowned faculty and programs, Syracuse University attracts Black students from areas urban, suburban, and rural across the United States and from many other countries.

The Summer Institute

Syracuse University through the Division of Student Support and Development sponsors several programs for the encouragement, enrichment and academic support of students from underrepresented ethnic groups. Preeminent among these programs is the Summer Institute a comprehensive pre-college experience. ***The Summer Institute*** is the "umbrella" organization administered by the Center for Academic Achievement Counseling and Student Support Center.

The Summer Institute is a unique experience where students are taught by qualified faculty. They have an array of resources and services available to them: academic advising, orientation, tutoring, career planning and counseling.[1] The Summer Institute (SI) of Syracuse University is a "six week transition program conducted during the summer prior to the freshman year." (Yonai, 1991:11). This pre-college program was conceived in 1979 as an

addition to the New York State funded Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP), a compensatory education program whose mission is to "make a true educational opportunity available to students of prior disadvantagement (Smith, 1991:51)." Students in this program represent diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds; however "they shared an important common experience, economic deprivation (Smith, 1991: 53)." Smith (1991) notes that the Summer Institute was developed:

> around the concept of developing skills for the purpose of student empowerment. Students were viewed as learners in an environment which was likely to be insensitive and minimally receptive of their presence.

Little has changed over the past fifteen years in the basic philosophy of student empowerment although the criteria for inclusion in the six week Summer Institute program have changed to allow more students to benefit.

The Students

The 1989 Summer Institute cohort of students was a diverse group of students, varying in ethnic background and academic preparation. All were considered "at risk" based on Federal, State or institutionally defined guidelines. The Summer Institute (1989) was set up to include students based on three programatic sets of criteria: HEOP, SSSP, C-STEP. Just over half (59%) were students selected to be served by the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP). For these students it was required by the

university that they attend the Summer Institute and successfully complete remedial preparatory courses in order to be admitted to Syracuse University (SU) in the Fall semester. By New York State guidelines these resident students were considered to be educationally and economically disadvantaged.

Additional students 24% of the total enrollment were admitted based on eligibility for the federally supported Student Supportive Services Program (SSSP). This program serves students, who have been admitted to the SU school of their choice, but with scores at the lower end of the admissions pool of students. In 1989 "all students identified as SSSP students prior to their freshman year, attended the Summer Institute" (Yonai, 1991).

The third criteria is one suggested by the Center for Academic Achievement (CAA) This office also administers the Collegiate Science and Technology Entry Program (C-STEP) and Focus in Science, for minority and economically disadvantaged students representing 17%. These were students from New York State, specifically "enrolled in historically under-represented fields of science, math and technology" (Duah-Agyeman, 1992). The CAA program "strongly recommends" the Summer Institute experience as preparatory to strengthen those students academically and socially. That 1989 year C-step students represented 17% of the Summer Institute.

Currently, the Summer Institute continues to be run under the auspices of the Division of Student Support and Development, by the Center for

Academic Achievement (CAA) staff each summer, working closely with the Student Supportive Services Program (SSSP) Learning Center. The Summer Institute structure requires all students to take a math and a writing course, based on their scores on the University's standard freshman pre-tests. In addition, students have a choice of an additional elective from the regular course offerings (e.g. Psy 205, AAS 112, Soc 102). Students can earn up to nine (9) credits as a start on their Grade point average (GPA). The program also allows students to meet with their Deans and to learn the campus locations and functions of administrative offices as well as a comprehensive overview of the Library services. The structure of the program also "enhances the degree of bonding that [students] seem to talk about because it is such a small program. . . students living together who begin to support each other" (Duah-Agyeman, 1993).

METHODOLOGY

My interest in collecting the data for this study has been to find out "how individuals create and understand their daily lives--their method of accomplishing everyday life." (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982). What I have tried to learn is how Black students accomplish their everyday life on a predominantly White campus. I wanted to contextualize and analyze the adaptive experience of these young adults both collectively and individually. In short, how do they survive and succeed in a hostile environment?

Researcher as instrument

Central to any research is the role of the researcher. This research provides a unique situation. Consider an African American student interviewing another African American student. Seemingly such an interview would be very simple to carry out. For instance, it would seem to be easy for the interviewer to establish rapport with the interviewee. In this case, however, the researcher is an older African American woman, seeking to interview students also of the African American diaspora between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. It was not easy, even though there was a similarity of cultural background because there were differences of age, experience and circumstance.

I began my undergraduate career only after rearing my family,. Consequently, I do not have the same frame of reference for life on a college campus as the students in my study. Initially, I had concerns about myself as the researcher. How could I approach the students? Would I be overly biased?

Entering college in 1983, I was not a typical adolescent going off to college between the ages of eighteen to twenty-four. I had never lived in a dorm, never had to address a professor from an immature stage of intellectual development (although I have had encounters with professors as a mature woman). I could not constantly compare my participants' experiences to my own. As a researcher, I was unsure that I would be able to ask my questions

because of the age disparity and because I might be perceived as a mother figure.

The issue of being a Black woman brings with it biases because I do have the experience of being a mother of college students, and a sense of what the African American youth might be going through. There is little, if anything, I can do about such bias except to recognize it and remain sensitive to how it might affect my research and conclusions. To that end, I acknowledge some preconceptions about the values which these students bring to campus: personal pride, dignity, and a sense of accomplishment in their own community. Whether or not the data will bear out these perceptions remains to be seen.

In 1988, I was hired as an administrator in the Syracuse University Events office that served as the liaison office for departments and student organizations to schedule their non-academic events, i.e. meetings, colloquia, symposia, and entertainment, as well as the services necessary to facilitate these events. In the role of administrator, I met a number of students, particularly student leaders who needed to schedule events. These students, representing different organizations, various ethnic groups, and all levels from freshman to senior, frequented my office to schedule their events.

A year and a half later, in August 1989, I received a fellowship to pursue my Master's degree full time at the university. While working on the master's degree, I decided to go into the Ph.D. program primarily to learn to

observe and research college students. Specifically, my interest was in African American students because of some situations I had observed in my capacity as an administrator working with student leaders. Black and Hispanic students, particularly, seemed always under pressure, always stressed out, but they were very positive in their roles as leaders trying to accomplish their goals. When I became a student and went out among other students on the campus, I noticed that many Black students were walking across the campus as if they were carrying heavy loads, troubled, not with smiles on their faces as one might expect of young college students. These students, obviously, had some serious matters on their mind. I wanted to find out how they managed their day-by-day activities. I talked to three or four of them during that semester (Spring 1990), and they related some of their frustrations, with campus bureaucracy, social interactions, and in "just coming to campus" each day. At that time, I was not doing any research; they were just confiding in me as an older, wiser student.

Progressing into the doctoral program and taking a course called Research on the College Student, I looked into the research in the area of student retention/attrition and dropout rates. The literature established some general observations about black/minority students that had been *proven,* according to their authors, by quantitative research. My experience led me to question that conclusion. I began to believe that I needed to do my research in the area of African American student retention because the literature, as I

read it, was not talking about Black students as I knew them. The students I have seen at the University are bright students, having been *selected* as part of the fairly rigorous admissions process. They seemed to be positive about themselves, even though they were by no means *happy campers*. Having considered the existing literature, I then decided that I needed to go to the source: the students. Education needed to hear from the Black students because the existing quantitative studies had been done using surveys, with some focus groups, but primarily all the studies had been based on survey instruments and Likert scale responses. Studies omitted the important factor for these students' experience: racial dissonance on the predominantly White campus.

As a researcher, I am interested in generating theory from empirical data as well as verifying or confirming preexisting theory. I am particularly interested in obtaining the multiple perspectives of African American students concerning their campus life experiences *in their own voices*. I have done a phenomenological study using a naturalistic, heuristic inquiry approach. I used open-ended questions while taping in-depth interviews. I employed a constant comparative method of analysis.

I have used grounded theory to meet the objectives of my analysis. In grounded theory there is simultaneous data collection, coding, analysis, reformulation, identification, and integration of themes/categories as they develop (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Theory grounded in the data is so clearly

related and stated that it cannot usually be disputed or refuted. Credibility comes from the data and the process of analysis. "Grounded theory is derived from data and then illustrated by characteristic examples of data." (p.5).

How I came to this research

In July 1989, the Summer Institute (SI), the pre-college transition program, brought in and housed 92 students who would be entering the University's various programs in the fall as freshmen. Among those 92 students were the African American students with whom I began my pilot study. In an administrative capacity that summer, I hired some of these same students as work-study students in the Schine Student Center. That Fall semester, I became a full time graduate student on the same campus. My continued enrollment over several years, enabled me to observe those students who persisted to graduation for the whole four years they were in college: Fall 1989 through Spring 1993.

From the time I began thinking about the question of how African American students persist, an additional concern was how to choose which students to ask, without merely pulling a *random sample*. One of my professors, during a conversation, mentioned a student/employee, Barbara Yonai, who had recently (1991) defended her dissertation: "The effects of a prefreshman summer bridge program on student persistence into the sophomore year." which indicated that the students who came in the summer were given a good foundation and were the least likely to drop out. The

professor suggested that a conversation with the author of that study might be time well spent.

Shortly thereafter, I met with Barbara Yonai to discuss her procedure and findings. Yonai's interest was in attrition of "at risk" students who had taken the SI pre-college experience. Hers was a quantitative study, to test the Tinto model of student persistence among Summer Institute students in the second semester of their freshman year, comparing them to a group of students who did not have that bridge experience. She encouraged me to solicit the qualitative data the African American students seemed willing to share. Their willingness to share was evidenced, she said, by student responses to the open-ended questions on the survey instrument she had used, as well as informal conversations she had had with various students.

My next step was to secure permission to conduct a pilot study from the Division of Supportive Services which was responsible for the Summer Institute (SI) Program. The Director of the Summer Institute made available the roster, and copies of the archived student journals of students who were enrolled in the 1989 cohort. He offered his services and suggested that I also talk with other program staff.

Pilot Study

For the pilot study, I interviewed seven Black students. All had been continuously registered as full time students since 1989 and had participated in the pre-college program known as the Summer Institute (SI). According to at

least two recent dissertation studies (Smith, 1991 and Yonai, 1991), and the Syracuse University Center for Institutional Development's freshman/senior survey reports, students from this Summer Institute program have a greater persistence rate than the average for the university and the nation. Yonai (1991:11) defined persistence in her study "as reenrollment at Syracuse University for the fall semester following the freshman year." For the purpose of this study, *persistence is defined as continuous enrollment at Syracuse University from Fall semester 1989 through graduation with a bachelors degree by December 1993.*

Participants

Initial interviews took place during the Fall 1991, and Spring 1992. One student's identification of fifteen other African American students from that 1989 SI class who were still registered in the University, began my research. After dealing with scheduling difficulties, I managed to interview four (4) of eleven (11) students during that Fall 1991 semester.

I completed the pilot study in December 1992. The pilot study looked at the importance of the Summer Institute program from the perspectives of students enrolled in it. The data speak clearly about the benefits from the program, as well as the disadvantages of it. Only data from the first seven student-interview transcripts were analyzed at that time.

The Dissertation Study

The experiences of the students interviewed for the pilot study were in several ways too similar. In particular, it was unclear whether Black students who had not taken the pre-college program were having the same kind of college experience as those who had. Selecting additional students who started in the previous year or in the same year but without the pre-college experience provided a broader view of the student experience.

Since a more purposeful sampling was indicated, I began talking to students in the Schine Student Center where, according to the management staff, most Black/African American students passed through between the hours of 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. My new criteria for the additional participants in the study were that the student be of the African diaspora, and have been enrolled at Syracuse in the Fall Semester 1989.

Data Collection

I interviewed a total of eighteen Black (of the African diaspora and/or biracial) students from Syracuse University, each of whom entered as Freshmen in Fall 1989. These included the students described above for the pilot study. Of these eighteen, nine (9) had participated in the Summer Institute 1989 pre-college program. The other nine (9) students did not have the pre-college experience. Chronologically, these students *should* have been juniors during the 1991-92 school year when I began my interviewing. However, some were second semester sophomores, while two were advanced

seniors. Second interviews with nine (9) students were conducted in the Spring and Summer 1993, including two students who were interviewed in New York City following their graduation. I also interviewed four (4) administrators who worked with "minority" students in an academic support capacity. These administrators provided me with institutional perspectives on the program's curriculum and objectives, as well as on the students as individuals, and the Black student group.

Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, using open-ended questions as recommended by Bogdan and Biklen (1982, 1992). Supplementary data were gathered from official, historical documents and, students' pre-freshman journals. All interviews were taped with the permission of the participants. The second interviews with nine students and the four administrators, were more focused than the first. During the second interviews, questions were still open-ended but included prompts such as: "Tell me about your interactions within your classrooms." "With your roommate." "What did you mean when you said...?" "Talk a little more about..." The purpose of these questions was to better understand the interactions with students, faculty members and administrators regardless of race, as well as interactions with African American students, within their own reference group.

Data Analysis

Miles and Weitzman (1994) list the general types of computer software for working with qualitative data as: *word processors; word retrievers; text base managers; code-and-retrieve programs; theory builders; and conceptual network builders.* Analysis and synthesis of the data for this study was accomplished using the computer program AQUAD. Miles and Weitzman (1994) classify AQUAD among the programs designed as *"Theory builders":*

> These programs, too, are often researcher-developed. They usually include code-and-retrieve capabilities, but also allow you to make connections between codes (categories of information); to develop higher-order classifications and categories; to formulate propositions or assertions, implying a conceptual structure that fits the data; and/or to test such propositions to determine whether they apply. [Data programs] are often organized around a system of rules, or are based on formal logic. (Appendix, 1994 p.312)

Data were coded as the tapes were transcribed, a factor which informed the on-going research. The constant comparative method was used in developing new codes as data became available from subsequent interviews. Where possible, transcripts were shared with participants to clarify content, intent, and interpretation. Four of the 18 students responded with feedback.

Checks on the data

In order to get a sense of whether what the students were saying was in any way what the institution had intended, I interviewed four (4) administrators: three from the Division of Student Support and Development (CAA, HEOP, C-STEP) and one from the Student Assistance Office (formerly Minority Affairs). Since the students talked about student organizations and their activism, I gathered articles from 1988, 1989, 1990, and 1993 from the *Daily Orange*, the student newspaper, and also looked at *The Record*, the University's official newspaper for 1988 and 1989. I also obtained from the Summer Institute, information from the journals that the students were required to keep while in the Summer Institute Program which chronicled their feelings and aspirations during that six week program.

AS THE STUDENTS' SEE IT:

This study is a longitudinal study not only because students were interviewed in their sophomore year and again in their senior year, but also because these African American students were asked to reflect on all their years at the university. The open-ended nature of the questions allows the subjects to answer from their own frame of reference rather than from one structured by prearranged questions (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982). More focused questions were asked during the second interviews with nine of the eighteen students. Many students remembered quite vividly their first visit to university property.

Contained here are reflections on their experiences, early years and

initial feelings as they made choices of friends, programs, organizations and their own behavior in this new environment. A review of research on the college student by Pascarella and Terenzini, (1991) has shown that students have many concerns which, although not classified as academic, do have a significant bearing on their ability to accomplish their academic work.

Initial impressions

Students in this study had mixed emotions about coming to college, depending on the circumstances. Maria talk how she chose which residence hall she wanted to be in that freshman year:

> I had a feeling. Is that strange? I had a feeling. I came up to the campus in the summer [1989], which is not an accurate time to come up to the campus. I asked people. I saw the way they printed up literature for the campus. I noticed, when I was picking out my housing after I was accepted, they had subtle ways of directing minority students where they wanted to put us. Sadler [residence hall] had a picture of an African American right beside the name. And no other place in the brochure was there an African American.

Celeste initially considered coming to a summer program a punishment but readily admits to the lasting affects it will have on her interpersonal skills:

> I had no summer vacation at all and I was very bothered by that but. . . I feel I definitely have grown from the experience. I've gotten a lot,

> aside from academically, as far as me as a person, I grew a lot from that experience because ... it was a challenge for me to have to bite my tongue a lot, and have to deal with authority figures.

During the 1980s, for some students, the first visit was by invitation to a special weekend known as *Black and Hispanic Weekend* on main campus. Some students attended a *Minority Reception* at the Lubin House in New York City.

The *Black and Hispanic Weekend*, for example, was sponsored by the admissions office to bring minority prospects to campus for a pre-orientation to the many campus activities, both social and academic, that Syracuse offered for minority involvement in the campus community. The academic component was more discussion of programs and a tour of the physical space than any actual classroom visit, as one student commented.

Johanna had mixed feelings about the weekend but was reassured by the involvement she witnessed:

> Oh [it was] great. It's good in a way and in a way it's not because you're focused on African Americans and your experience and all is something that is predominantly Black, but that's not really the situation here [in a regular semester]. So, when you get here, it's different. Aside from the fact that you have no work to do and you come for the weekend, you're just like enjoying yourself. So, but it was good, it was good. I remember when I came there was a big controversy over the

> Science and Tech protests that the African American Society [SAS] had. They [administration] explained what had happened and it was good to see that the students were aware and activist and not passive, so you know that sparked my interest.

During that weekend, each student was hosted by a minority student currently enrolled at the university and was encouraged to socialize with others. Johanna related having made an acquaintance on this weekend which became a sustaining friendship once reunited on campus: "And I met up with someone I met during the *Black and Hispanic Weekend*. She's in the choir. She's my roommate now."

The evening *Minority Receptions* at Lubin House are the first in a series of pre-admission information activities provided for students and their parents to interact with a University representative. For many of these students, the cost of a visit to campus is prohibitive. Special nights in the local environment allowed parents and students to discuss the salient issues of college life, such as housing, financial aid, admissions requirements, and student life. A Pre-professional, Program information session is the other major component of the Lubin House Experience. These sessions have particular program focus (Morrison, 1989). This experience is an opportunity for underrepresented students, to meet someone who could be that one familiar face in the sea of unfamiliar faces on campus.

Tirae gives her perception of why these pre-orientation meetings make a

difference:

> We took placement tests to see where you are in math and so on and so forth. So down in Lubin House in New York City, I had met everyone that I was to be in summer institute with. I don't know for the most part, only one or two people didn't come to the summer institute. So a lot of these people, and it is an all day thing, so we had spent all day together with one another, we even did lunch. We had lunch together so we had gotten to know one another before we came to summer institute. We had exchanged phone numbers so I had been speaking with some people before I actually got here. So by the time I got to summer institute, I already had some friends. So by that time we were building on already started, already made friendships.

The experience of leaving home, and going to an unfamiliar place is a part of growing up. When college is that transition, there are associated feelings of excitement and apprehension. Yoclee described what it was like taking the road-trip from Manhattan to Syracuse to attend the Summer Institute 1989:

> We came through the mountains and there 's nothing (pause), but farm animals and White people. I said, "Oh mommy, no, no. But before I left [home], let me tell you, I cried. I cried the whole way up here. I cried myself to sleep.

Yoclee's statement has not meant to say that she did not know that Syracuse

was a *predominantly White institution (PWI).* She did. They all did. What most of them did not know, however, was what those words looked like in actuality. Even those students who had been to the university for a pre-admission visit or to the Summer Institute Program had a false sense of the numbers and little sense, if any, of what the day-to-day life on a predominantly White campus might be. Gail felt that Black and Hispanic students should have been hosted during the week: "I wish that we could have sat in on classes." She felt overwhelmed by the size of the introductory classes in the large lecture halls.

Summer Institute

The Summer Institute program was designed to help students from socially and academically disadvantaged backgrounds to become familiar with college life and demands, prior to coming on campus in their first semester. The 1989 Summer Institute (SI) is remembered by students who were not in the program as well as those who participated. Nine of the eighteen African American students (4 males and 5 females) in my study were in that 1989 cohort. All eighteen students agreed that SI students had advantages over the other freshman going into the Fall semester.

Celeste explains a bit of the complexity of that advantage:

> The Summer Institute people. We knew where all the buildings were. We knew where not to go. We knew what was fun here. We knew places to go to hang out on the weekends. We had

been up here for so long. . . We had a clique! And I noticed through my interacting with other people that it was kind of..it was..tighter than I really thought it was. Like, some people didn't fit in just because they weren't in Summer Institute and they had a harder time trying to hang around with us... A lot of the times, in my opinion, it depends on the school they come from. Like some people that came from small schools are overwhelmed by the size. Some people that come to Summer Institute feel that there's going to be so many African Americans when they come that they're overwhelmed when they [return] in the Fall.

Rema helped me understand how the cliques from *the City* got formed:

. . . [T]here were three people from my high school [in SI]. That is it. Everyone else pretty much got together. We had no choice, you know. We ate together, studied together, slept together, everything. We had no choice. The little time that we had after study hour, everybody just stayed together. So it was just like, you know, there was no not liking one another. We spent time together. It was a little cliquey because everybody had their own group pretty much depending on where you lived or what classes you had or who was with you. But basically my circle now is pretty much my circle from SI. A couple of people from

> my high school who came to Syracuse that I have known for years. . . But it's the same. My roommate now [Senior year] was in Summer Institute with me.

Rema referred to the fact that the six-week stay on campus at that time was structured very tightly to insure that the students learned good study habits, how to relate to authority, how to assimilate into the campus community and be prepared for college life. The students needed a solidarity to bode the changing of old habits.

Jay Jay felt that students gained more through SI than one could expect to garner on his/her own. The camaraderie and entree' to the campus hierarchy and office structures were what gave him an advantage. Here is how he put it:

> Another thing it did was it brought people together that otherwise would come up here and be lost. Being in Summer Institute opened a lot of doors for me with the administration, socially. When you come up here and, you know these people. You know them. You know who they are and you interact with them. [Being in SI] gives you a chance to get to know the buildings. You're not as lost. You get to know the system of SU, your classes, how things are (pause) Over all, it did help me. It did.

Students who had *not* been in the summer program also commented on

the Summer Institute advantages. Johanna recognized what she had missed by not having attended SI. She described her first week on campus:

> A lot of people that I met that weekend didn't come here, so, um, you know, it was like I didn't know anyone, and then I came like a *day* late. . . [I]t seemed as though I came a *week* late and everyone was already matched up in pairs and then, (pause) It's really different when you don't go to Summer Institute because everyone that went...they know each other already and you wonder what's going on. . . so I'm like, "How come these people all know each other already? You know, like what's going on." But it was really different, and it took a while to get into the gist of things after getting up here for the Fall semester.

Dano also had a difficult time connecting that first semester because, although he was from *the City* he did not qualify under SI criteria, but he wished he could have come to the program:

> . . . I didn't need to come, but I kind of wished I did come for the summer program. I think it's an excellent program because it sort of takes away a lot of that initial shock that can mess you up later on, that initial shock that most people go through that first freshman year and then they're struggling second semester freshman year. A lot of my friends that were in the summer program really did well their freshman year, and they continue to

do well. So I think the summer program is something that I missed out on.

The College Experience

Our brightest Black students, even those who have had same advantages as Whites, for example prep school and educated parents, seem to be traumatized by institutionalized racism. Many retreat from careers within their ability in math and science fields, for example Engineering, Chemistry and the professional schools. This is not meant to be a blanket statement. However, my data include several students who entered the University in either Engineering or pre-med (with scores high enough to be accepted) who by the end of their second year had changed their major. There were multiple reasons for these Black students to make their changes, and I submit that indecision or incongruence with an initial major, is not only a *Black problem*. Arnie candidly told me about coming in feeling competent of his skills in math and science and what it felt like to have that confidence eroded:

> After Summer Institute, my [GPA] was a 2.3 because I had two C+s. In September in the fall of 1989 I was a freshman in engineering. I did engineering because in high school I did well in math. I had a 95 average in math. Science was more like 85. So I figured since engineering was math and science oriented, I would give it a try. It turned out I had a lot of difficulty. . . So I said maybe it is like the first semester of my first year and I am

> going to give it another semester. So my first semester I didn't do well. My second semester I continued and I still didn't do well but I figured maybe it is just the first year. Maybe the second year I will start to do better and I will start to think more in terms of an engineer and it will come to me. But I found out that it didn't. I kept discovering these problems that I could not solve. I had tutors, I had upper-classmen, but I just found that I did not like it. I thought I would because I liked math and science in high school. But also because I thought that if I got a degree in engineering, I could make some pretty good money when I get out. . . . [M]y grades were suffering badly because of it. Unfortunately, I was removed from the engineering school.

Arnie was deflated and his confidence was shaken as he took this personally to mean he was not a good student rather than understanding that he did not want to be an engineer.

On the other hand, J.R held fast to his belief in himself when he found he did not like engineering. He struggled but made the decicion at the end of his first year to change to Arts and Sciences for a year and take liberal arts classes while he applied to the School of Management for Economics as his major. He told me what it was like in engineering:

> I didn't feel like I was getting anywhere and I was putting in the time and putting in the effort and my grades didn't reflect it and

> my motivation was diminished because of it. And I also saw that people in different majors, you know, doing less work than me and doing better than me, you know, it just kind of didn't help the situation at all.

Some additional Reflections

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) in their review of research on the college student surmise that students have many concerns which, although not classified as academic, do have a significant bearing on their ability to do their academic work. In my study I used open-ended questions like "Tell me about your experience here in your freshman year" to obtain a variety of information about the things students have on their minds.

For Example Jay Jay remembers his freshman year:

> You're trying to center yourself but you're a freshman. You really don't know. So, I could have done a lot more but.... It was basically being a social butterfly freshman year. Concentrated on hanging out, going out and that being a part of the group.

Johanna, not being a partier, remembers:

> I think a lot of things affect you academically that you wouldn't really expect to affect you. Like I went through this before in my freshman year my roommates were white...and that affected me academically, because it wasn't like I was out all night partying. But it was like the pressure of the world was on me. I'm like,

> why am I surrounded by whiteness. I mean, I really had a problem with that. It was like they would go to bed at 11 o'clock. I'd be up studying and it was like, why do I have to study so hard. Why and then [them] getting the 4.0's and they're in bed. Why is that? Then, you have to realize that some people have to study more than others. It's not that "Oh, I'm black, I'm stupid", or anything like that.

And Tirae remembered the innuendoes:

> I was the only Black student, and I was female. I remember my TA saying to me, "You know if you need any help, just let me know. Don't hesitate to call me." She was pacifying me. So I was just like, okay, I'm going to show this woman. I was like, "You know maybe she is trying to be helpful - but at the same time she is really making me mad." I ended up getting an A in the course.

Difference

The data indicate that these African American students have many experiences in common, because of the Summer Institute (SI) program, because of their blackness, and because of their daily experiences on a white campus. One student talks about the privilege of SI, which made them feel special:

> We had exchanged phone numbers [at a minority recruiting

> event] so I had been speaking with some people before I actually got here. So by the time I got to Summer Institute, I already had some friends. So by that time we were building on already started, already made friendships. Also, probably the best in my summer institute was a class called REM [college learning strategies taken by all SI students].
>
> She made us go to the library to learn how to use the library. Although the system has changed from the time I entered, I still know how to find things in the library. A lot of students don't know how to use the library. I think that was probably one of the greatest things I learned in summer institute because I was just walking in doing what I had to do and I was out whereas most people had to ask the librarian who had to take a lot of time to help you.

Also, Black students' experiences and perspectives differ, however, according to their socioeconomic status (SES) and family educational backgrounds. College students want to fit in, in some way that is comfortable to them. Several of these students talked about groups, sororities, fraternities and other informal cliques or groups where they found comfort. Jay Jay talked about how students make choices. He believes:

> Basically, it's a part of your environment. It's a part of your culture. And I do believe this firmly, that the way you are

raised, who you are raised with defines your mentality; defines your ideas and your beliefs. Not color [Jay is bi-racial and could "pass" for white]. Some people ask me why I didn't join a white fraternity, why did I join a black fraternity? Because, they had more of the things that I believe in. So, the community that I believe in, you know. I believe in an African American community. So I will support that. And there are just certain things you feel at ease with. Like African Americans who join a white fraternity, they join it because that's who they hung around with, that's who they feel comfortable with.

Johanna is Black, but not American:

I think about it [being perceived as an African American], but I mean it's not - I am a Black woman - and that's another thing, the terminology, you know, should we use this, should we use that. I mean, I don't get offended if people call me African-American at all because, you know, to me it's just another term for Black. It [the fact of not being African American] affects a lot....I think I feel other things differently and more universally. I think, especially since my parents are the West Indian, but I wasn't born in the West Indies or raised in the West Indies. I was born in England, so I just had all these different perspectives on a lot of things.

And Celeste comes from a large family with stated educational goals for the children:

> I have two families. In my mother's family there's only three of us. In my father's family there's eleven of us. Education was stressed, for everybody! . . .I was always good academically just by the way I was brought up in my family. Academics were always expected in my family.

The category *African American* is used by institutions as a catch-all phrase for persons of color who do not have distinctive *international* features or language. As is the case in the larger society, however, the African American students come from all different social, economic backgrounds and ethnic combinations. *Black* students also come in all different shades of brown from the very light *passing* color of mixed lineage, to the *rich dark black* of full African descent.

In addition to these aforementioned differences, these students come from different parts of the country and different types of locations: rural, urban, suburban. Yoclee spoke on these differences with some examples:

> I know many of [the other Black students], and I know that we have - the ones that I have come in contact with - we have different views about different things. I guess because of our back..our different backgrounds.

These realities surface as issues which students have to deal with every day

Yoclee continues:

> For example how (pause) we can use things, like how we cook some of the things that we eat. Living in a projects, we're used to going down to the corner store where there is a Chinese restaurant and buy food instead of cooking. Whereas, she 's come from a home where there was etiquette, for example where people..they sat at the table and ate. And they kept their elbows off the table and they....you know. Things like that, where we get a piece of chicken, put it in our hands and go to town. (laughter) You know and she sits. She cuts her chicken with knives and... And it was a problem for her because, you know. She sort of labeled us as savages or something.

It was these differences among the African American students on campus, the subtle and not so subtle racism, along with their choice of friends and organizations which surfaced as problematic for these students. The subtle racism was a daily occurrence mentioned by most students. Tirae uses a video game as an interesting metaphor:

> It is like culture shock every day. You are used to it, but it is culture shock every day. You live in your room and everything in there represents you, or it should represent you. That represents me, everything in there. Then I walk outside and it is a whole different story. It is kind of like being on a video game.

> Because you are walking outside and you see all of these things and you are ducking and dodging this and you are ducking and dodging that, and you are trying to avoid this stuff going on over here in the corner. So your only outlet becomes what you do in your spare time.

She sums it up:

> But that is the way it is. It is rough. People get stressed. I am talking about stress just being on this campus, just dealing with the every day nonsense. It is actually . . . so common that you actually forget things like the racism every day. The people.. you know.., the girl sitting next to you in class and you go to ask her a question and she turns her head as if she doesn't see you. And the professor that doesn't want to call on you even though there are only two people with their hands up and things like that. You just get so tired of it day in and day out. It wears on you.

A thoughtful reflection by Johanna is appropriate here: "I think a lot of things affect you academically that you wouldn't really expect to affect you."

EMERGING THEMES

In the early stages of analysis, three major areas surfaced into which students remarks and concerns could be categorized: **Identity/ development** (and how it gets sorted out), **Social interactions,** and **Academic interactions.** Recurrent themes within these broader categories provided starting points for

my current investigation.

Identity - Black identity was an issue for each student either on an individual or group level. It was interesting to note the language that students used to talk about themselves, and non-black friends and family. Students used the terms Black and African American interchangeably. *"African American"* was always used when speaking about an individual student, however, *Black* was used when talking about a group action. They were conscious about using "correct" terms (e.g. European, Korean, American, African, Cambodian) when speaking of an individual.

Identity ("who I am" and "where I belong") came up in students' definitions of self, in relation to other students within-group, within-gender, with other groups. There was also the issue of labeling and being labeled, who's doing the labeling, as well as, stereotypes maintained by society and often held by the students before they came to campus. Differences of family background, role models and family economics among African Americans were as problematic for these students as the differences between White and African American students. Students struggled individually with their grades, their place on this campus, their responsibility to home. The period most commonly intense for these students was the second semester sophomore year through the first semester junior year. The struggle with who I am and why am I here was apparent for most students. Recent literature from Cross (1991), Helmes and Parham, (1992), King, (in press) and Hollins, (in press) provide

rethinking of previous theoretical literature on identity and Black consciousness.

Social Interaction - Socializing with and in the African American reference group was surprising for many of these students. The social activities: dances, cultural gatherings sponsored by Black organizations, membership and participation in groups and, working with the "community service projects", were the most important part of each of these students first two years on campus. The affects of relationships: "friends", different living arrangements (locations and roommates), as well as, "what's acceptable or not acceptable" socializing to African American students (re: race and interracial, where to hang- out, drinking, segregation), were reflected, according to the students, in how they "were able to handle everything else" (Kasey, I#1) about being on this predominantly white campus. However, the overwhelming number of "majority" students was a "culture shock" to most African American students coming back in the Fall after that first Summer Institute. The subtle but constant racism was the condition that these students most resented.

The cohort of students I interviewed, had been able to form lasting friendships during the pre-college Summer Institute, among the Black choir, student organizations or among the community families and churches. Support groups as safe havens, formed in the first two or three semesters, grew more important as the years continued.

Analysis of the early data indicates a trend of "self assessment" (looking at their social and academic progress) at some time between the second semester sophomore and first semester junior year, where the students "came to terms" with themselves, their goals, achievement and persistence strategies.

Academic Interaction - Giving the students the opportunity to talk about what was important to them, using the open-ended questions, did not furnish much data on the experiences in the academic arena of campus life. Yes, there were a few comments about being the only African American in a classroom and several of the students spoke of the feeling of being ignored when they raised their hands in class. It was only on the second interviews that, because I used more specific questions, (such as "tell me about what it was like being in your classes" or "is there a particular interaction with a faculty member that comes to mind, tell me about it") I got some specific data about interactions with students in the classroom, with Teaching Assistants and Faculty. It is the students' perception that getting through college and interacting with faculty are more difficult for students of color, than for students of the majority culture.

Some students related lengthy critical incidents from classroom experiences or with faculty. There was a mixture of remarks, positive: "He had a very large impact on me." or "My marketing professors PRETTY MUCH have all been very helpful." and not so positive: "the faculty don't really interact with you" or, "Anyway, they think we can't do the work". "We always

have to work harder". All of the students interviewed mentioned racism and having been affected by it either in a classroom, an administrative office, or an incident with students on campus. Racism is one of the major themes running through all of the students' years at the university, this data is being further analysed and will be included in the completed study.

ENDNOTES

1.This quote was taken from a 1992 Summer Institute, Center for Academic Achievement brochure. 1989 brochure was not available. The only difference in programs is the addition in 1991 of "The Summer Bridge Program" which is available and "all prefreshmen who are African American, Mexican American, Native American or Puerto Rican are strongly encouraged to attend." These students have been admitted to SU but are not eligible for any of the sponsored programs.

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